

## **Jerry Pickman: “The Picture Worked.” Reminiscences of a Hollywood publicist**

HALL, Sheldon <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0950-7310>>

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**Reminiscences of a Hollywood publicist**

**Edited and introduced by Sheldon Hall**

**Contact details:**

**Dr. Sheldon Hall**

**Dept. of Stage and Screen Studies**

**Room Owen 1130**

**Sheffield Hallam University**

**Howard Street**

**Sheffield**

**S1 1WB**

**Telephone: 0114 225 6224**

**Mobile: 07845 704 205**

**Email: [s.hall@shu.ac.uk](mailto:s.hall@shu.ac.uk)**

## ***Jerry Pickman: "The Picture Worked"***

### **Excerpts from the reminiscences of a Hollywood publicist**

Jerome (Jerry) Pickman (b. 24 August 1916; d. 18 November 2010) worked for more than fifty years in Hollywood film marketing and distribution. A native New Yorker, Pickman served as a reporter on the *Brooklyn Eagle* and other New York newspapers and took a law degree before entering show business as a publicist for Ted Lewis, Tommy Dorsey, and other musicians and bands. His association with the film industry began in 1944 through a chance meeting with the entertainer Eddie Cantor, who employed Pickman in a personal capacity before he joined the publicity department of Twentieth Century-Fox later that year. Short stints with various independent outfits followed, including Eagle-Lion Films as publicity manager and later as assistant to its director of advertising, publicity, and exploitation, Max E. Youngstein.

In April 1949 Pickman was appointed director of exhibitor relations at Paramount Pictures. When Youngstein joined the company as senior publicist, Pickman again became his assistant and, after Youngstein resigned in February 1951 to join the newly reorganized United Artists, eventually replaced him. According to *Variety*, this made Pickman, at 34, "the youngest ad-pub chief in the business".<sup>1</sup> He subsequently became vice president in charge of worldwide advertising, publicity, and exploitation, and in November 1960 was appointed general sales manager for the domestic market while retaining his "ad-pub" responsibilities, thus becoming "the first domestic sales head to move up through the ranks of publicity in a major motion picture company."<sup>2</sup>

Due to what was termed in the trade press a "personality conflict" with the company's head of worldwide distribution, George Weltner, Pickman's contract with

Paramount was terminated in July 1962.<sup>3</sup> After attempting with Youngstein to set up a new distribution and production finance company modeled on United Artists, he became a special sales executive at Columbia Pictures, handling the films of major producers such as Carl Foreman and Sam Spiegel, and then was associated with an independent theatre company, the Walter Reade Organization, publicizing both art and exploitation pictures through Reade's distribution arm, American Continental. Pickman set up his own distribution outfit, Levitt-Pickman Film Corporation (later the Pickman Film Corporation), in 1971 with the builder William Levitt. In 1978 he was appointed head of domestic distribution for Lorimar Films while retaining control of his own company. The Pickman Film Corporation was absorbed by Scotti Brothers Entertainment Industries in 1985, though Pickman again remained in position as its president. He continued to be a consultant for publicity and distribution matters and in the year of his death he was working with Albert S. Ruddy, the producer of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), to set up a 3-D remake of an epic blockbuster.

In February 2010 I was approached by an associate of Pickman's to collaborate with Jerry on writing his memoirs. I was given access to a transcript of recently recorded reminiscences, from which the present article was adapted, and later met with Jerry in London. Instead of a memoir, I proposed a book on postwar Hollywood marketing built around Jerry's experiences. In November I flew to New York to discuss this with him further and to examine his surviving papers and photographs. (There were few written documents in his personal files because Jerry took it as a point of pride that he never wrote things down, never kept records, or even used a briefcase.) However, by this time Jerry was seriously ill in hospital and, shortly after my return to the UK, at the age of 94 he died.

The transcript of Jerry's taped reminiscences runs to nearly 48,000 words. It is largely discursive and anecdotal; many of the stories recounted in it were also delivered to me by Jerry in person and via email. There are also many typographical and factual errors (such as inaccurate dates and film titles), and the material as a whole is unstructured either chronologically or thematically. What follows, then, is my edited and corrected version of selected extracts from the transcript, rearranged to follow a roughly chronological order and with many passages transposed or otherwise amended to maintain clarity and coherence. I hope, however, that it preserves something of the flavor of Jerry's Brooklynese speech and his engaging personality as well as conveying the nature of his work. I dedicate the article to his memory.



Jerry Pickman (1916-2010) used with permission

## Early Years at Fox and Eagle-Lion

I lived with the Cantors in their house on Roxbury Drive. The neighbors included Jimmy Stewart and Jack Benny and the Gershwins. It was a great street right behind the Beverly Hills Hotel. I was the chauffeur, gopher, major domo, manager—I did everything. I spent about a year, a year and half, with the Cantors and we made a picture, *Show Business* [Edwin L. Marin, 1944], with George Murphy, who later became a Senator, and Joan Davis, who I think was having an affair with Eddie Cantor at the time. We finished the movie and came back to New York to open it. I went to see my father who was very ill, I discovered, with diabetes. I knew he had to stop working and I had to work out something to take care of him and my mother. I ended up with Cantor and that afternoon I told him I couldn't return. We were out somewhere and he introduced me to a man named Hal Horne, who was the head of advertising and publicity for 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox. Cantor, in his own impetuous way, said, "Hal, this young man is a good man. You have to hire him. He needs a job and I told him to come to your office Monday morning and go to work." And that's how I got into the film business. He hired me to take advantage of my "vast" background in show business, which I embellished. I became the administrative assistant to the vice president in charge of advertising, publicity, and exploitation at 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox. That was my first true experience with part of the business I enjoyed, thrived on, and stayed in: distribution and marketing.



Pickman (right) at dinner with Mr and Mrs Eddie Cantor; used with permission

I remember the office on 56<sup>th</sup> Street way over on the West Side near 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue. All of the major companies were headquartered in New York in those days. Paramount was at the Paramount Building overlooking Times Square. Warners had a building on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and RKO was on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue; MGM was in the old Loew's State building. I had to look at all the bills and see that they were getting value for their money and that the work was being done on schedule. We had a series of twenty or thirty men all across the country that worked the field. We would create all the materials, trailers, and ads. There was a great deal of showmanship because you would open a picture maybe in LA or New York for a month or two and build it up. You released pictures in an inverted pyramid with

two or three theatres at the bottom, then branched out to maybe 300 and ultimately play five or six thousand; now you play 2,000 the first week.

After I graduated out of the administrative side, I kind of became an operating head of the exploitation and publicity side. I helped to plan the campaigns and premieres and how we would promote the picture, what kind of emphasis, the amount of money we would spend, and the different attitudes that you would take toward it: sell it as a kid picture, adult picture, action, and when to go with it and how. The first big film I worked on was a picture called *Wilson* [Henry King, 1944]. I went to Washington D.C. and oversaw the entire launch of the picture with all the government officials and big tributes to [President Woodrow] Wilson's memory. It was a Darryl Zanuck production and a very, very good movie. We lived in the best hotel—I never lived so well. We had cars and drivers and money to spend and it was just... it was truly Hollywood. The band business was nothing. This was big-time movies. They brought in a trainload of people from the studio, Zanuck and everybody you could think of, and they were out to do it full blast. The whole town turned out. It was spectacular. Then I worked on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* [Elia Kazan, 1945]—I remember chaperoning Peggy Ann Garner and her mother around—and I worked on a couple of pictures with Roddy McDowall and some Dana Andrews pictures. One picture I remember was *Laura* [1944], made by Otto Preminger. It was my project and I nurtured it all the way through, culminating in a big, big premiere at the old Roxy Theatre which Fox owned and controlled.





Window display promoting the release of 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox's political biopic *Wilson*; used with permission.

I stayed at Fox for a year or so and we got into a hassle and Hal Horne got eased out. I was offered a job in the foreign operation and I said no. I ended up working for David O. Selznick on a great Western [*Duel in the Sun*, King Vidor, 1946], doing promotion. I did that for about six months to a year and then I got call from Horne, who was starting a company with a man named Armand Deutsch. He was the heir to the Sears Roebuck family and was starting a little independent film company. Stanley Kramer was going to be their producer and we acquired a book and we worked on that for three to six months. Then Max Youngstein, who I had worked with at 20th Century-Fox, invited me to join Eagle-Lion. Arthur Krim and Bob Benjamin were lawyers, and through a great, talented guy named

Matty Fox, who was a great mover and manipulator, they joined the J. Arthur Rank Organization of England (which was the Lion) and Robert R. Young, the railroad magnate who owned the Chesapeake and Ohio railroads (the Eagle).

We got the second tier of pictures from Rank and produced pictures in California with Bryan Foy, who was the studio head, and Swifty Lazar, the talent head. Rank used to make a lot of pictures and the good pictures they made would go to Universal. They had first pick; we would get the leftovers, like *Green for Danger* [Sidney Gilliat, 1946] and *Bedelia* [Lance Comfort, 1946]. One day we got a picture titled *The Red Shoes* [Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948]. Max and I were just ready to kill ourselves; we didn't know what to do with it. We had our office on 46<sup>th</sup> Street, but whenever we got depressed or wanted to feel important, we would walk over to Sardi's on 44<sup>th</sup> Street and have lunch. We felt so badly after seeing *Red Shoes*, we walked over to Sardi's to drink a little bit and commiserate. We had a great lunch and we walked back through Shubert Alley and as we got to 45<sup>th</sup> Street there was a legitimate theatre called the Bijou Theatre. There was a guy we knew standing inside the door just hanging on and looking very disconsolate and we stopped to talk. He said, "Hey, you guys got a movie? We got no stage shows, we gotta do something with this theatre." Max looked at me and I looked at Max and said, "That's it. We're gonna put *Red Shoes* in here, we're gonna make a road show special"—two [performances] a day, very elitist, a snob thing. And that's how *Red Shoes* became a classic.<sup>4</sup>

## **Paramount**

I was at Paramount when the guy who headed the advertising department left. I wasn't strong enough to take over the top job but I was able to maneuver Max Youngstein into it and Max came over as #1 man and I was #2 man. We were kind of almost equals at Eagle-

Lion but he was older and had the stature for it. It was at that time that United Artists was re-formed and he went over to UA. He wanted me to go; we didn't know if UA would survive so we decided he would go there and if things got bad he could always come back to Paramount and if ever I got into trouble at Paramount I would go over and he would protect me. I got the job at Paramount on a temporary basis and in about six months I became VP in charge of advertising and publicity.

When Max came over I was finding my way, just kind of being a specialist in little things. Max and I were finally teamed up together with *Sunset Boulevard* [Billy Wilder, 1950]. It was a great picture that never went anywhere [commercially]. Then we ended up with the first of three DeMille pictures I worked on, *Samson and Delilah* [1949].<sup>5</sup> Later I worked on *The Greatest Show on Earth* [1952] and *The Ten Commandments* [1956]. I worked on four pictures over four years with four women and each won the Best Actress Academy Award: Shirley Booth for *Come Back, Little Sheba* [Daniel Mann, 1952], Audrey Hepburn for *Roman Holiday* [William Wyler, 1953], Grace Kelly for *The Country Girl* [George Seaton, 1954], and Anna Magnani for *The Rose Tattoo* [Daniel Mann, 1955]. Before *Roman Holiday* Audrey had made one little picture.<sup>6</sup> We signed her to a seven-year deal. She got \$25,000, and we gave her a bonus of \$25,000 after she won the Academy Award. Then Dino De Laurentiis wanted to hire her for *War and Peace* [King Vidor, 1956] and give her \$300,000 and her husband Mel Ferrer \$175,000. We controlled her and the company didn't want to let her go, but I said, "If we can get the distribution of a picture like *War and Peace* at no investment, other than giving her the right to do the picture, let's do it." And that's how the picture came to Paramount.

Even though I worked in New York I made it a practice to get to the studio once or twice during production and to work with the producer in the campaign.<sup>7</sup> I would go to the

studio in California twice in one week sometimes. I never was domiciled there, because I didn't want to work in a company town. I would go out on an afternoon flight; in those days it would take eight to ten hours to fly. You would have to stop in Chicago to refuel, arrive late at night, work all day, and maybe go back the next night or stay an additional day. I would see every producer who was either in production or in post-production and spend a great deal of time with key creative, oftentimes very insecure, but talented individuals. Because of the insecurities and attitudes producers and directors always thought that everybody was sabotaging them. My theory was always to stroke them and I would go out of my way to spend time with them, show them that we had an interest. No matter whether it was George Stevens, DeMille, Dean [Martin] and Jerry [Lewis], or [Melville] Shavelson and [Jack] Rose, or [Norman] Panama and [Melvin] Frank, Hal Wallis, everybody I ever worked with I always worked with directly. I would always discuss the marketing and how the picture would be released. That's why Paramount worked so well—it was a like a little family company and through the Fifties and into the Sixties we never had a losing year, we always made money—not a lot, but when the industry was at its lowest ebb. The Fifties was when television started its ascendancy and people were so infatuated with television, they would just sit and watch it regardless of what was being shown. Most of the film companies were in terrible shape but we at Paramount had a great run of highly received, well-produced pictures through the Fifties. We had the Danny Kaye pictures, the Bill Holden pictures, the [Bing] Crosby pictures, plus three big DeMille pictures. We had Elvis Presley pictures, we had Dean and Jerry going twice a year and never missing at the box office.

The studio would tell us what they wanted to do and we would approve it. So the studio ran certain things, but the studio didn't get into distribution, the studio didn't get into advertising, the studio didn't get into sales. I saw a rough cut of *White Christmas* [Michael

Curtiz, 1954]. It was almost finished and I think it was early August. I loved the picture—it was schmaltzy and it grabbed me. I almost cried during the movie, sitting alone in the cold projection room. In those days I could call my own shots—I could make my decision on how to handle a picture and just tell management what I wanted to do and they usually agreed. Y. Frank Freeman, whom I always called Mr. Freeman, was kind of administrative head in the company and then head of production and he was the [West Coast] liaison with New York and management. I walked in to his office and said, “How soon can we get *White Christmas* ready?” He said—he was a Southerner—“Jerry, ain’t no hurry making the picture, we could get it done in time for Christmas.” I said, “Mr. Freeman, if it’s up to me we’re not going to release the picture at Christmas, we’ll release it in September.” He debated and we called Music City, a music store on Hollywood and Vine, put the loud speaker on and got the manager on. I said, “Have you ever heard the song *White Christmas*?” He said, “Oh yeah, know it well.” I said, “When do you start selling?” He said, November. “Does it sell pretty well?” “Yes, it sells very well.” I said, “How would you sell it on December 30<sup>th</sup>?” “We don’t sell anything December 30<sup>th</sup>. Christmas Day we stop selling.” I made my point, they rushed to finish the picture and we opened in the [Radio City] Music Hall. It was on fire from October 14<sup>th</sup> until Christmas Day and then it died.



Pickman (right) discusses publicity matters with *White Christmas* star Bing Crosby; used with permission.

I remember vividly we had a budget for advertising in those days and Jerry Lewis actually left the studio because I wouldn't approve a trade ad. In those days we had eight or ten trade papers like *Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* and *Film Daily* and so forth and we had a budget for trade ads. He wanted a special trade ad somewhere and I said no. My

people asked me and I said no, it's not in the budget. He stormed, screamed, hollered, and we went to the head of the studio and he walked off the lot. We didn't give him the \$400, he came back to work. We controlled the money and *we* would tell *them*. I would always try to communicate with the producers and the people but it was how *we* wanted to do it. We would listen, we would discuss it, and do what we wanted to. But now, the stars tell them what they want.



Paramount executives including Pickman (third from left) meet with Jerry Lewis (foreground). At left is Martin Davis, future president of the company; used with permission.

I was part of the advent of pay-per-view [television] in the mid-Fifties. Paramount had a thing called Telemeter—perfected by scientists. Your house was wired and a coin box was placed on your TV set which had a reel in it. An announcement would come on announcing a film for 75 cents and you would put in three quarters or two 50-cent pieces—

you could get credit. It was tested for many months in the suburbs of Toronto and in Palm Springs, California, and it just petered out. When it was at the height of its research and development we had a meeting at Paramount and I said it can't work unless you go and self-start it by going to at least ten major American cities that have major baseball and football and wire up, at your expense, 100,000 homes in the ten cities, which would give them a base of 1,000,000 outlets. I will say they liked the idea and played with it for weeks and discussed it, did all kinds of feasibility studies, and the reason why they didn't do it was it would have cost \$100,000,000. It was an idea that could have worked and would have worked. They would have had a lock on the entire cable business in America but it didn't happen.<sup>8</sup>

### **Barney Balaban and Adolph Zukor**

Paramount was run by Barney Balaban, a legendary figure in the business, who was brought in by the banks during the Depression. He was a remarkable man. I stood with Barney in the airport in LA talking to Lew Wasserman. Wasserman got on the plane and sat in first class and Barney and I sat in economy. Barney said, "The plane gets there the same time, it doesn't matter." He was very frugal in every way. He ran the company like his own family business: no memos, rarely had a secretary. Green-lighting was oral—he knew who the producer, director, cast were and got a synopsis. All meetings took place in Balaban's office, no matter what department it was. He was at the meetings even if he just sat reading the paper or doing something else.

There were maybe six or seven executives. We would travel together, be together. We were part of management and we sat in on all the production decisions—not the nitty gritty, but the studio would get the ingredients together and call New York. Barney Balaban



had a loudspeaker on his desk; he would buzz—there was a buzz box, an intercom—to the head of Eastern production, myself, maybe the treasurer, head of foreign sales. We would gather in Barney's office, standing around the desk, and the studio head would get on the loudspeaker. I'll give you an example. [Alfred] Hitchcock wanted to make a picture called *The Trouble with Harry* [1955]. He had a little girl named Shirley MacLaine—"I never heard of her," said the studio head—and an old man, Edmund Gwenn, and it was going to cost \$800,000. We all shook our heads, the answer was no. Well, every morning I would have the studio send me a capsule of all the announcements they made to the press. They would give me a summary, and the next morning I see they announced *The Trouble with Harry*. I was a little annoyed but I wasn't going to go down and challenge the president of the company. We used to have a lunch room—a dining room with a big old boardroom table. Adolph Zukor would sit at one place and maybe ten of us had entree to the room. I would sit as far away from Balaban as I could, at the other end of the table, because he used to ask me a lot of questions which I didn't have the answers for and I didn't want to be bothered. The less I talked to him, the less trouble I got into. He walked in, had his lunch, and as he walked around he said, "Is something bothering you? You didn't you say hello to me." I said, "I'm annoyed, Barney. Why did we have the meeting yesterday? We decided not to make the picture and the studio wired this morning saying we're going ahead with it. If you changed it, why didn't you tell us?" He said, "I was too embarrassed. After we all said no, the studio head called back and said, 'Barney, I can't tell Hitchcock no, because he gave us *To Catch a Thief* and *Rear Window*. I haven't got the courage to say no to him, so I told him we were going to make the picture.'" And that's how the picture was made. That was how the company was run.



Pickman (at right) on set with Alfred Hitchcock (right of camera); used with permission.

Adolph Zukor's office was next to Balaban's. I will say one thing about Barney. He didn't need Zukor, he could have thrown him out, fired him when the bank put him [Balaban] in as president. He was so gracious and tolerant of the old man who founded Paramount that if he was talking to you and Zukor wasn't around, he would refer to him as

Mr. Zukor and when he addressed him directly, he would call him boss. Now Zukor must have been thirty years older, a beaten old man, and Balaban treated him with such reverence and respect that you couldn't believe. I guess late in the Fifties we were having a bad run of pictures. They weren't working and one day I was going into a meeting. I was dragging myself, looking depressed, and the old man, Zukor, stopped me and said, "You don't look so good, Jerry." I said, "I don't feel right—we can't do anything right." He said, "Come with me." He had a high stool he sat on, his legs were draped over, he lit a big cigar and started pontificating—very sweet—and said in his Russian-Jewish accent,<sup>9</sup> "I've been in the business a long time. You've got to remember show business is like a vheel [sic] and the vheel turns. Sometimes you're up and sometimes you're down, but you gotta hang on because the vheel will turn." And that's the best philosophy I ever heard from anybody.



Paramount founder, Adolph Zukor; used with permission.

## DeMille, Stevens, and Hitchcock



Pickman and Cecil B. DeMille discuss *The Ten Commandments* while star

Charlton Heston looks down from above; used with permission.

I was very close to Cecil B. DeMille on *The Greatest Show on Earth*. I spent three or four weeks in Sarasota where he was shooting the picture and traveled with him. I looked at some footage on the picture and he asked me what I thought. I said, "Fine, but I think we got a problem. I don't think people will believe that Betty Hutton really left the trapeze and swung through the air and was actually caught by Cornel Wilde as true circus performers. They're going to say it's trick photography. They are not going to believe an elephant

stepped on Dorothy Lamour's head and other things." He said, "What will we do about it?" I said, "We've got to get the entire company and do it under a true canvas setting in the actual circus just so that we can say *The Greatest Show on Earth* was actually filmed under the Big Top. If we do that, C.B., I will bring out 100 newspapermen and we'll put them in the audience and we'll let Betty Hutton fly through the air, and let the people see her leave the trapeze, and let them see Cornel Wilde grab her by the wrist, and so on and so on." It would have cost \$900,000 to do it. He said, "Do you know my deal?" I said, "The company pays everything to you and once the negative cost is returned twice you get 50 cents of every dollar." If it costs \$5,000,000 to make the picture, he doesn't get a dime until the picture earns \$10,000,000. He said, "Jerry, I have to earn almost \$2,000,000 more to do what you are asking me. Will Paramount take half of it?" I said, "Certainly." I didn't have to go to anybody because I knew it was a deal. We went to Philadelphia, we got the 100 newspapermen, we did the thing, and it worked. *The Greatest Show on Earth* became an event movie and was nominated for Best Picture and won the award. That's an example of marketing, where we made a contribution.



Pickman in the Big Top used for the filming of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. The photograph is signed by star Cornel Wilde; used with permission.

We had a preview of *Shane* [1953] in San Francisco and everybody came out from Los Angeles. I came out with a couple of my guys and the picture was an absolute disaster. It just didn't play, it lay there and nothing happened. Afterward the Paramount executives—a group—were standing on the side street, commiserating. They would have liked to burn the negative and hopefully get the insurance. [Producer-director] George Stevens, whom I knew and liked—we got along well—came out of the theatre several minutes later, and he nodded to me. He said, "I know it didn't play well, Jerry, don't worry about it. I know exactly what it is. I will call you in about a month. It's going to be okay." Cut. A month or two goes

by and I get a call from Stevens. He shows me the picture and it is absolutely remarkable. George Stevens was a notorious overshooter. I think George shot 100,000 feet, but the [first] picture he showed us was told through Shane's eyes. He went back and reedited it and told it through the little boy's eyes. It was a completely different movie. The picture worked. I cried, I thought it was the greatest thing I ever saw.

I talked about it all over the country. I used to go the Paramount offices, have sales meetings, meet the customers and talk to the press, and I billboarded this picture for months. One day I get a call from the Music Hall, which was pretty much the home of MGM pictures, and apparently they had a hole—an MGM picture for some reason dropped out and in four weeks they needed a picture. I had talked to Russell Downing, who was managing director, and he said, "Could we have *Shane*?" We were still not set on what we were going to do with the picture and we had a big meeting with Balaban, Zukor, the other people involved, and I said I wanted to open the picture in the Music Hall, which went against the trend. It was a Western and you didn't play Westerns in the Music Hall. Zukor, who saw the preview and hadn't seen the new picture, said, "What the hell are you going to do? The picture is no good. Jerry'll be as ready in four weeks as he will be in four months and if it works there it'll work anywhere, so open it."

We had to work feverishly and I oversaw the campaign. We came up with a device—the ads with a big, big outdoor vista and a little figure of a little boy and the line "SHANE, SHANE, come back SHANE." [The title] must have been three or four inches high, and then down the bottom was the billing: "Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin in George Stevens' *Shane*." Well, I went through the motions of showing Stevens the ads but he was pretty astute and he said, "Jerry, that's a violation of my billing—you've got the tagline bigger than the title." It all had to be 100%, *Shane* had to be the biggest thing and everybody's name

had to equal the title. I said, "George, fuck you, sue us. That's the way the ads are going to be." We opened the picture with those ads. It worked. The picture went into the Music Hall and set an opening day record. I flew all night to Denver and we opened it in Denver the next day. I bought the last \$5 worth of tickets at 9 o'clock at night to set a record at the theatre, where we did \$4,000.

I worked with Hitchcock on five pictures: *Rear Window* [1954], *To Catch a Thief* [1955], *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], *Vertigo* [1958], and *Psycho* [1960]. I was responsible for the whole *Psycho* premiere and not letting people in [after the film had started], which was a classic stunt. Hitchcock was making a Paramount picture on the Universal lot because he was busy making *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, a TV show. I had been over to visit and he showed me the picture alone, unscored. I told him I thought it was nothing but a very violent *Hitchcock Presents*. He said, "Well, that's basically what it is." I said, "Hitch, we got a problem." In those days, people didn't always come in at the beginning of the movie. "People are going to walk into the theatre after the picture starts and they are going to look for Janet Leigh and she ain't gonna be there. And they will never get into the movie." Hitch said, "What do you propose to do, my boy?" I said, "Very simple, Hitch. We won't let anybody in once the picture starts." He said, "How will you accomplish that?" I said, "We will do a series of ads and promotions. We will use you and if you give me your TV writer, the guy who does all your intros, I will work with him and we will do things like, 'No one, not even Her Majesty the Queen, will be admitted once the picture has started.'" The picture became a classic.

### ***Strategic Air Command***



Jimmy Stewart was a classic unto himself. I never really got to know him personally except in one or two meetings professionally when we were making a couple of pictures. Jimmy was a colonel in the Air Force and apparently attached to the Strategic Air Command, which was then headed by Curtis LeMay, a very militant general who was fighting the Cold War practically single-handed. LeMay was quite cavalier about the military and didn't care about anybody living or dying. Jimmy came up with the idea of doing a story aggrandizing the Strategic Air Command and particularly LeMay. The story was patterned after a ballplayer whose career was interrupted to go into the service and pretty much resembled that of Ted Williams. At that time, we perfected a new presentation method called VistaVision which was really, I guess, 70mm film as opposed to 35mm.<sup>10</sup> We shot the film sideways; I am not too good technically, but it came up with a beautiful, beautiful picture. If you can visualize, big 47s going off into the sky—it was magnificent.

I started to play with a campaign and it was very rough to come up with an easy, saleable approach if what you had to present was Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson over a title called *Strategic Air Command* [Anthony Mann, 1955]. You couldn't make it romantic or very appealing and I sent somebody to Washington to see what kind of cooperation we could get. My young man came back empty-handed and I decided I sent the wrong guy. I had better go myself, which I did, and went to Washington to see what I could do. The first stop was at the office of a man who handled the lobbying for Paramount in Washington and when I told him what I was there for, he kind of smiled and said, "Jerry, you're wasting your time. You will never get any cooperation in this town from any of the government or the military on behalf of anything that favors Curtis LeMay. This town just doesn't like him. They don't like the way he operates, the way he does business, or anything about him." I immediately called Frank Freeman and told him we needed help. We weren't getting

anywhere with the military on promoting the picture. He asked me what I wanted done. I said I would like to get a date with LeMay and talk to him. He hung up the phone and about an hour later the phone rings. I was told, you've got a date with General LeMay tomorrow morning at the Air Force base in Omaha, Nebraska.

I flew all night, checked in to the Blackhawk Hotel, and got a cab and went out to the air base in the morning. My name was at the gate. I was put into a vehicle with some MPs and driven into this cavernous, cavernous hangar which was empty except for a desk that looked like it was two football fields away and a pinpoint light. With the military police I was escorted down and one of the policemen said, "This is Mr. Pickman from Paramount." The man I could see had salt and pepper hair, didn't get up, didn't look up, and growled, "What do you want?" I explained to him who I was and what I was there for and the picture—did my whole pitch and that we needed a lot of cooperation to properly market this movie; at which point he stands up. He was a short, stocky man, I think 5'6" —5'7" and in gray overalls, mustache, butt cigar, two pearl-handled revolvers at his side. He looks up at me and says, "Young man, I am fighting a war here and I haven't got time for your nonsense." And he practically dismisses me. As I had learned in the Army, they couldn't court-martial me for something I wasn't a part of and I just looked right back at him and I said, "Well, General, you run your war and I will run my war. I just want you to know so that it's not a surprise when I get back to New York, I am going to recommend to my people that we change the title of this picture from *Strategic Air Command* to *Into the Wild Blue Yonder* and it will show a nice picture of airplanes in the sky with a nice romantic two-shot of Jimmy and June in the foreground." And I turned on my heel and walked out. Military police picked me up, drove me back to the hotel.

The following Monday, I came in the office and there were six people all from the Strategic Air Command standing there, a major, lieutenant, WACs, and a couple of other PR people. They had been detached to me and Paramount to help us on the promotion of *Strategic Air Command* and they did one hell of a job. [Talk-show host] Arthur Godfrey was a big aviation buff and a great friend of LeMay's. I don't think that Leno and Letterman today combined are as big as Godfrey was in those days. He was the king of nighttime TV. Anyway they arranged every night for a month that Arthur Godfrey had a clip from the picture, or some piece of business or actor or something going. They did interviews, they had people coming, we did more promotion, more nonsense. From what is now the Letterman theatre on Broadway, where Godfrey used to broadcast, down to the Paramount Theatre, we closed off Broadway and had a parade the night before the picture opened. We had the damnedest premiere we ever had for no reason at all, with military bands, police, you name it, everybody. Godfrey and the SAC put it together and the week before that we had two or three days in Omaha where LeMay opened up the whole base, where he explained how he had constant surveillance of the Russians and the Cold War was on. We brought press in from all over the world and every important columnist in America; we had a half dozen planes fly in from New England, from the South, from the Southwest, the West Coast and then had a three-day big press showing out there. And the kicker was the next morning after the big parade, the Paramount Theatre opened early in the morning, and the place was jammed—the people were lined up around the block. I remember vividly going up to a little old lady and saying, "What's your interest in this picture?" She said, "Oh, Arthur Godfrey said I wouldn't be a real American if I didn't come to see this picture and I want to be the first one because I am a real American." The picture became a hit in America and didn't do business overseas, but we did very well.



Distribution executives including Pickman (far right of top table) and exhibitors attend a conference in aid of a 1952 publicity drive; used with permission.

### ***The Joker Is Wild***

*The Joker Is Wild* [Charles Vidor, 1957] was the story of Joe E. Lewis, a Chicago nightclub entertainer who in the heavy days of the Mafia changed clubs. One day they sent a few of their boys over to visit him and they cut his throat. He ultimately recovered and became quite famous. He worked the Copacabana and he was a great boozier and a great raconteur. We finally made a picture about his life based on a book. Frank Sinatra played Lewis and the picture was a wonderful little movie. The strategy to me was to use Joe and Frank and I had them all agreed. We were going to do what I thought was a unique stunt: one day we were

going to open the same picture with the same stars in New York and Chicago, because the picture mainly took place in New York and Chicago. We were going to open the picture a little bit early in New York, let's say 6pm, grab a plane and be in Chicago at 8pm. We were going to charter a plane, have it all synchronized. When we leave the theatre the police would run us out to LaGuardia where we get into the plane, fly to Chicago, run to the theatre, and we would be covered by what little TV there was in those days and the newspapers. We would maybe take twenty newspapermen. That was the gimmick.

It was difficult to put a campaign together because of the title. How do you have a romantic two-shot with Frank Sinatra with "The Joker Is Wild"? People will think it's a card picture or a joke. Sitting in the office one afternoon doing something else I get a call from the Paramount music company to come right over: "Sammy has to play a song for you." Sammy Cahn was a great songwriter who wrote with Jimmy Van Heusen and wrote a lot for Crosby, one of the hot writers of his time. Sammy is a peppery little guy, jumping around, and he plays a song: "Jerry, this is the greatest song I ever wrote and it's going to win the Academy Award." The name of the song was "All the Way". Well, that personified the picture, how this guy, Joe E. Lewis, lived. He lived all the way, he gambled all the way, he ran women all the way, everything was all the way. I loved the song and I believed Sammy was right. I got all excited. I prepared two campaigns for the picture: one campaign for *The Joker Is Wild* and one campaign for *All the Way*. I got everybody that was involved, from the management, to the studio, to producers, the agents and directors, including the guy who wrote the original book, Art Cohn. I did my best [pitch] ever. I did an hour with props, visuals, bells, whistles, trailers, showing the two campaigns to contrast which one would work, and they were practically standing and cheering. At which point a guy sitting in the back of the room, who was wearing his hat all through the meeting, smoking a cigarette,

just said, "I'm Art Cohn. Some of you may know that I wrote the book and my contract says you can't change the title without my permission. And gentlemen, I'm not giving you my permission. Good day." The picture didn't do very well. You just couldn't sell the picture. Many times titles are so misleading that it will hurt them.

### **Departure from Paramount**

I got into a power struggle at Paramount unbeknownst to me. Somebody was very jealous of me and did me in. When I got the job as head of sales, I needed to replace myself as head of advertising although I was the first one to keep advertising under the sales manager's job where they always had been separate. At that time I think I was the first one who held both jobs; both advertising and sales reported to me. I interviewed a half dozen people. I kept being badgered by two old friends, one a guy named Herb Golden, who was a banker friend of mine at Bankers Trust, and Tom Pryor, who had been at the *New York Times* and who I later got a job as the editor of *Variety*. They kept foisting a guy named Martin Davis on me. I had interviewed him once and the second time I interviewed him I noticed he carried the *Wall Street Journal* with him and I said to myself, this is not right. I don't want a guy with the *WSJ*. He should be carrying *Variety* with him. But I didn't trust my instincts and I did hire him and taught him a whole lot of what I knew and tried to bring him along. He managed to sabotage me by nefarious ways and I would say added to my demise.

I went to visit all the [Paramount distribution] offices over a protracted period—I would go out on a Tuesday and hit somewhere on Wednesday, somewhere on Thursday, Friday, come back in the office on Monday. This was over a period of weeks because we had thirty-two offices in the US and six in Canada and offices all around the world. In those days there was uniformity, each of the distributors had thirty-two offices in the US and they were

standard. Everybody distributed pictures from the same bases. In the US today nobody has offices anywhere, because you have so much modern communication. But I was doing a big drive and you'd go into Chicago, Cleveland, etc, work with your people in the morning and have a lunch for the exhibitors in the afternoon, and then you take on the press. I really worked the town. I guess while I was on this series of trips Marty Davis was able to undermine me for his own purposes.

When I was finally terminated I remember telling Barney Balaban that there will be no Paramount in three years as you now know it with your people because you're all old and don't have the energy. And sure enough in three years they were all out. Almost three years to the day, a raid was started on the company by Herb Siegel and Ernie Martin, who was one of the great producers on Broadway (he did *Guys and Dolls*). They wanted to take over, when a white knight was brought in, who happened to be Charlie Bluhdorn.<sup>11</sup> Davis became very tight with Bluhdorn and ended up succeeding him when Bluhdorn died. But I always said that my instinct on so many things was so good that the one time I didn't trust it, it cost me. Now Davis has been dead for ten years and I'm not mad at anybody. But I should have gone with my instincts and not hired a guy who read the *Wall Street Journal* rather than *Variety*.

I think I made a big contribution to the company in the years that I was there, maybe not because of my talent, but because of my energy and what I brought to the table. As I said, the Fifties were the toughest years ever in the film business. We had a great run of great pictures with great people and we had major market share through all of the Fifties.



Near the end: company president George Weltner and Paramount executives including Pickman (second from right) in the early 1960s. Pictured at left is studio founder Adolph Zukor; used with permission.

## Columbia

I went to Columbia for five or six years and I handled special sales and advertising. They would give me a couple of pictures to handle, and I would liaise and oversee the advertising and distribution around the world. Carl Foreman was a writer-producer and had made a lot of good movies. He was making *Born Free* [James Hill, 1966] and I was very close to him. I was on the [African] location and got very friendly with Joy Adamson. We brought her to America and we spent a lot of time with her. The picture came to New York and we had a



preview. Everybody in the office was thrilled by it and I was making some arrangements for the movie, representing Foreman, when I get a fax or cable from Carl saying he wanted the song *Born Free* eliminated from the film. He was unhappy with the music and he was going to change the whole score and I was supposed to tell the management what he was going to do. Well, I didn't agree with him and management didn't but he prevailed. We took the lyrics off the main title and end title, but the song got out somehow and come Academy Award time everybody was talking about nominating the song. But the song wasn't in the picture so they had to go redub the end and have a special engagement in LA for a week so the song would qualify, and it won the Academy Award.

A friend of mine, Harold Hecht, who had been a partner of Burt Lancaster and really made Burt as a good producer, was down on his luck and made a deal to make a picture called *The Ballad of Cat Ballou*. I went up to Loew's 86<sup>th</sup> Street [cinema] to see a preview of the picture and it didn't play very well at all. It was a disaster. I'd have said if the audience had stones they would have stoned the screen. It was a satire and they just didn't dig it. And the Columbia people were distraught. They just ran like thieves from the building and I got left with Harold Hecht. We walked into a German coffee shop and had some coffee. I'm giving him all the bromides to avoid telling him the truth and finally he goes back to his hotel. Next morning I get a call from Abe Schneider; he was the president of Columbia at the time. I get into Schneider's office and there are ten executives in there and little Harold Hecht, and Schneider turns me to me and says, "Jerry, Harold tells me you think the picture is great and it's going to work, it's going to be a big hit and you know what to do with it and you'd like to handle it. Well, you're in charge of the picture. Whatever you want to do, you distribute it, you merchandise it, you handle it, and it's the most important thing you have to do. Whatever else you're doing, forget it, just do this." I couldn't say no.

I took the picture on and I made them change the title from *The Ballad of Cat Ballou* to *Cat Ballou* [Elliot Silverstein, 1965]. Jane Fonda and Lee Marvin were in the picture. They were nothing at the time. We hid them in the billing and we came up with a drunken horse falling down as a symbol and we did a campaign: it's outlandish, it's hilarious, it's so forth—every big adjective—and it's also very funny (in small type). I knew the picture needed a slow build-up and instead of opening in New York or LA, as you did in those days to build public opinion, critical acclaim, I had somebody do research and I got a lot of colleges in non-major markets: college towns that were big towns not small towns. They came up with about twenty or thirty cities and we got those cities, those towns that were in session between Easter and Decoration Day, where we would have six or eight weeks. We picked eight or ten of those towns that were minor cities, such as Austin, as opposed to Dallas, and Madison, as opposed to Chicago. We opened the picture very modestly in each town in April and May, and the young people understood it and it built. Finally we came into New York in mid-July or early August. The picture had almost a groundswell and took off. It built up enough momentum and word of mouth and it ended up with Marvin getting an Academy Award.

In those days the airlines had something called in-flight movies. But the theatres objected if they played a picture on the airlines before the theatres. They thought it would hurt the theatre business. And most of the companies respected it. But to get the build-up I needed for *Cat Ballou*, I wanted the kind of exposure I could get with a captive audience, and I told the guy who was handling the airlines to book it, contrary to the policy of waiting until after the theatres. He went to his boss, Sol Schwartz, and said Jerry Pickman wants to do so forth and so forth. I had a meeting with Schwartz and Bobby Meyers, and I said, "Sol, we got cooperation from the airlines, we're going to paint the plane in Western colors,

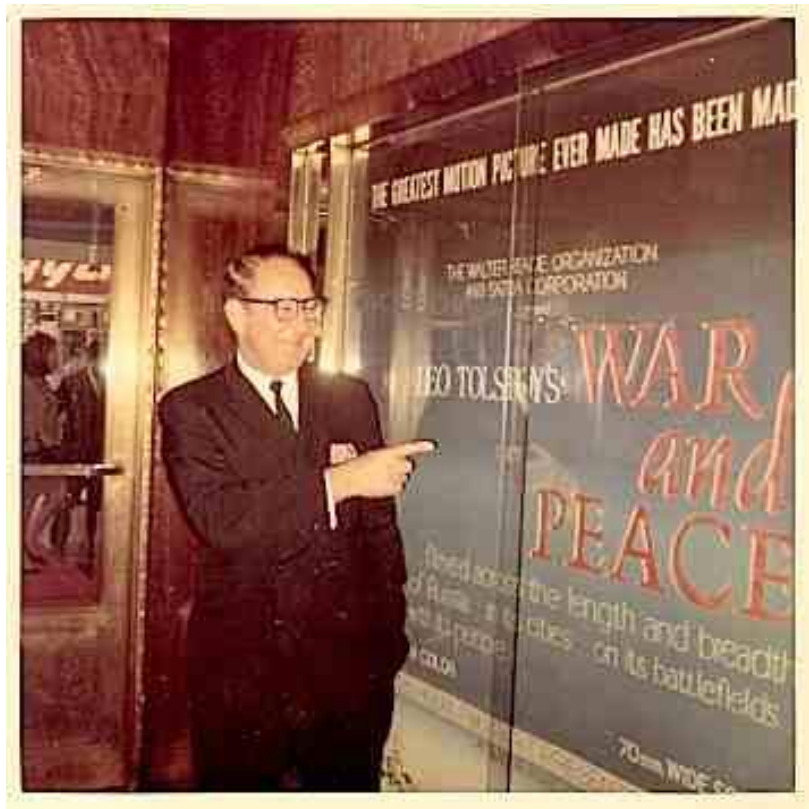
stewardesses are going to wear Western outfits, we're gonna take a horse on the plane, flying him across the country in a passenger seat." And I give him all of this bullshit. I adlibbed twenty or thirty things they were going to do and we walked out of the meeting. Bobby looked at me and said, "Jerry, what are we going to do? How can we do all that?" I said, "Bobby, don't be silly, we're not going to do anything. In a week they'll forget we ever said anything." And we went and opened the picture and the picture worked.

I came up with this very unorthodox approach to the handling of a picture, going against the norms of distribution. The sales manager at the time was a very old guy and I indirectly reported to him. Somewhere in the conversation, I said, "Rube, I don't know whether this is going to work or not but I really am going to do some unusual things with this picture. I want you to back me." I remember he said, "Kid, if you're right, I'll back you all the way." I said, "You stupid old son of a bitch, I don't need you to back me if I'm *right*, so fuck off." And I think that's what ruined me at Columbia. But he was only going to back me if I was right.

### **Walter Reade**

I was very friendly with a guy named Walter Reade, who had a small theatre company, and he prevailed upon me to come and work for him. I ended up running the picture company [Continental] for him. I ran whatever I wanted to and we had a good time for a couple of years. I took a documentary that had been on PBS about Johnny Cash; we doctored it up and called it *Johnny Cash! The Man, His World, His Music* [1969] and we did a tremendous amount of business with it. That's also when I had my second *War and Peace* [Sergei Bondarchuk, USSR, 1965-67; US release, 1969]. After I had handled the American version at Paramount, Walter Reade and I bought the six-hour Russian version that we used to sell in

two halves. We had a first half and a second half. We would run it afternoon, evening, and we kept rotating the picture and it became a classic but we never really got everything out of it. But I was the only one associated with two *War and Peaces*.



Pickman outside a theatre presenting the two-part Russian version of *War and Peace*; used with permission.

We had no money, and we were picking pictures. While Walter was in Europe somewhere, a friend of mine, this old agent, Bud Rogers, came to see me and said he wanted me to screen a picture. I said, "I can't do it. It's on 16mm and I don't want to look at 16mm, what am I going to do with it?" He said, "It's a 16mm negative—please look at it." We set up a 16mm projector in the office and we looked at it. It was called *The Night of the Anubis*. I didn't know what Anubis meant. So I went to the dictionary and I saw the definition: a jackal-headed God who conducted the dead to judgment. It was a terrible,

terrible picture. And I said, "Okay Bud, I've changed the name to *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]. I don't want to make a blow-up; you'll have to provide the blow-up. I want a 35mm negative with a new title and I want you to add some more screams and some more things to it." And he delivered it. I think Reade still didn't know about it. The picture was made by a half-dozen guys in Pittsburgh. They were in the advertising business and George Romero, the director, became a legend. We took the picture to Pittsburgh and I remember we opened it on Rosh Hoshana or Yom Kippur; we did a lot of business and we promoted the shit out of the movie. When Reade saw it, he said "I don't want to be associated with it." When he saw the grosses, it was the best thing we ever did. The picture was made by the way we handled it and the campaign. That's marketing.



Pickman addresses the press at a conference for Walter Reade's release of the controversial *Ulysses* (Joseph Strick, 1967); used with permission.

## **Independence**

After twenty years of making big contributions I didn't want to work for anybody. That's when I started the Pickman Film Company and ultimately met Bill Levitt, who was the famous builder of Levittown. I was struggling with the Pickman Company and he said, "Why can't you do bigger things?" And I said, "Bill, I don't have the money." He said, "You've got the money, I'm your partner." We opened an account at Chase Manhattan and we had unlimited credit. That's how we became Levitt-Pickman until we terminated. We had a lot of fun with *The Groove Tube* [Ken Shapiro, 1974], which went on to make \$11,000,000; the picture cost \$200,000. We made a tax shelter deal and the tax shelter gave us \$75,000 to cover our expenses. I got Movielab—I screwed them a bit—making answer prints from a CRI [color reversal internegative], and kept rejecting the answer prints till we had four of them. I took the answer prints and we opened with them—four engagements. The picture worked.

*Heartland* [Richard Pearce, 1979] was a beautiful movie. I saw a review at the New York Film Festival. I tracked it down and called William Morris [Agency]. "Oh no, we got a deal with Warners." Year later, I called the same agent, Jeremy Zimmer, who was a big Hollywood agent. "Whatever happened to *Heartland*?" "Oh, we're deeply in a major deal!" A year later, Zimmer called me. "Remember that picture *Heartland*?" "Yeah, Jeremy, that piece of shit still around?" He said, "Yes and we'd like to talk to you." I said, "Be happy to—on two conditions. One, we talk in my office 'cause I'm not coming to your office, and second, before we go any further, no matter what happens I get 40% of the gross from the first dollar." I got the picture, I got my 40% distribution fee, and they paid all marketing

costs. But I waited my time and it worked. It was a small picture and also had played a special TV run on American Playhouse—it had a run on PBS before it went to theatres. The film did very well at the box office. We played the Northern part of the United States because the picture was so heavily snow-oriented. It was the story of a family in the Dakotas and I knew it wouldn't work in the South. And it never worked in the South. These are the instincts.



Pickman at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, with actress Susan George; used with permission.

### **Instincts**

Everybody you meet wants to be a producer or a director. I never wanted to be a producer. I didn't have the patience to be a producer. I couldn't ever visualize that any more than I

could visualize motherhood. I couldn't take a piece of paper, have to get ten writers to write and rewrite, cast it, then recast it, shoot it, reshoot it, edit, reedit it, and spend nine months and then take it out one day and have it go on its ass. I couldn't live that way. I think I could run a studio. I think my instincts are good. I think I know material, but I couldn't live with any one project that much, for that long.

I think I know pictures. I contended in those days that I could call 90% of the pictures within 75% of their ultimate domestic gross or I could call 75% of the pictures within 90%. I really knew the market and I'm not saying this immodestly, because I knew what was going on out there, I knew how to spend, and what to spend, and this was before you bought the gross with TV. We actually worked the campaigns, we exploited the pictures. We might open a picture in New York, LA, Chicago or maybe open twenty cities one day; or you might open fifty theatres in Dallas and nowhere else, unlike the 2,000-theatre break you have today, because the public's attention was different. We didn't have the gongs on every street corner. Now you sell pictures like hot dogs—it's the same for everybody. We created different markets for different pictures.





### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank John Godl for approaching me to write about Jerry Pickman and the many individuals who provided generous hospitality, assistance, and companionship on my first-ever visit to New York, including Brendan Cooper, Barbara Herburger, Bud Rosenthal, Sue Zamkow, and especially Jerry's daughters, Peggy Reiner and Patricia Udell. Mostly, however, I would like to thank Jerry, for his considerate interest in me, the pleasure of his company, and the memory of his friendship, however brief its duration.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Youngstein quits Par for UA top spot; Pickman succeeds," *Daily Variety*, 13 February 1951, 8.

<sup>2</sup> "Par promotes Jerry Pickman as domestic sales chief," *Daily Variety*, 23 November 1960, 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Boasberg replaces Pickman as Par's distrib'n chief," *Daily Variety*, 27 July 1962, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Red Shoes* ran at the Bijou Theatre on a two-a-day, reserved-seat basis for 108 weeks, earning a box-office gross of \$960,000 (*Variety*, 15 November 1950, 4).

<sup>5</sup> Although *Samson and Delilah* was produced before *Sunset Boulevard* (indeed, one sequence in the latter shows DeMille's film in production), its initial engagements were on a limited roadshow basis and it was not generally released until 1951. It was probably on the film's general release that Pickman and Youngstein worked together.

<sup>6</sup> Before signing for Paramount, Audrey Hepburn played the lead in a French film, *Monte Carlo Baby* (1953), and had supporting roles in one other French and five British films.

<sup>7</sup> By "the studio" Pickman means Paramount's production division, based in Los Angeles, as opposed to the New York-based distribution division and senior corporate management.

<sup>8</sup> On the history of Telemeter and other early pay-TV experiments, see Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: from Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990) 124-36; Megan Mullen, "The Pre-History of Pay Cable Television: an overview and analysis," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 19, Issue 1 (1999), 39-56.

<sup>9</sup> Adolph Zukor was born in Hungary.

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<sup>10</sup> Introduced by Paramount in 1954, VistaVision was a widescreen process which used 35mm film running horizontally through the camera rather than vertically. Each frame was twice the size of regular 35mm. The first two films released in the process were *White Christmas* and *Strategic Air Command*.

<sup>11</sup> After an attempted takeover bid, Paramount was bought in 1966 by the conglomerate Gulf + Western Industries, whose chief executive officer was Charles Bluhdorn. After Bluhdorn's death in 1983 he was succeeded by Martin S. Davis. See Bernard F. Dick, *Engulfed: the Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001).